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SUBJECT: MUSLIM FSO'S REFLECT ON CARTOON CONTROVERSY

¶1. (SBU) Note from Ambassador: At my request, two members of my staff, both of them Muslims on their first overseas tours with the State Department, provided below their reflections on the Danish cartoon controversy. I asked them to share their personal reactions as well as attempt some analysis on the reasons for the reactions we have seen. I hope this message contributes to the discussion of lessons learned from the cartoon controversy among our policymakers and analysts in Washington as well as among those of us serving in countries with large Muslim populations.

Personal Reflections -----

¶2. (SBU) As progressive and devout Muslims raised in America and employed by the U.S. Government, our initial reactions to the Danish cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist were discontent, frustration, and dismay. We were upset at the Danish newspaper for failing to exercise good judgment in publishing such offensive and predictably destabilizing material and we were surprised by the Danish government's decision to forego condemnation of the publications. We were frustrated at the misguided and misplaced public arguments espoused by the European press legitimizing the cartoons and their publication as exercises in freedom of speech. We were dismayed at the ensuing (and foreseeable) violence and the opportunity presented to religious fanatics and political opportunists to exploit and undermine the sanctity of Islam through acts of incomprehensible violence.

Addressing the Root Cause -----

¶3. (SBU) The majority of the European media and certain political figures have failed to address the root cause of Muslim anger and frustration at the cartoons. The European default has been to deflect Muslim sentiment as reactionary and evidence of Islam's incompatibility with Western ideals of liberty, progress, and enlightened thinking. As a result, European political and public rhetoric promoting free speech has further aggravated Muslim sentiment, and in the process, united Islam's very diverse social and religious spectrum, resulting in both non-violent and violent manifestations--the latter being propagated (and aggravated) by a largely radical minority of religious extremists and political opportunists.

¶4. (SBU) Muslim moderates, embodying the majority of the Muslim world, opted rightly to voice their condemnation through non-violent mediums of expression in accordance with Islam's non-violent ethos. (Note: The term "Muslim" means "one who submits" to the will of God--Allah (in Arabic meaning the One God). Islam derives from the Arabic root "Salam" (Peace) and means "submission" to the will of the one God.)

¶5. (SBU) Many non-violent protesters are even calling attention to

growing Muslim perceptions of "Islamophobia" in the Western world. Unfortunately, Muslim reaction in the media has been largely defined by the more visible violent responses. Many of the isolated violent demonstrations appear to be the hallmarks of religious extremists and anti-democratic political organizations. These entities have mobilized supporters and other disenfranchised elements to advance parochial political interests under the guise of religious protest. Nonetheless, these and other non-violent demonstrations underscore the broader Muslim discontent with the publications.

Not About Freedom of Speech

¶6. (SBU) For Muslims, the cartoon controversy is not about freedom of speech. The publication of the cartoons did little to advance the cause of free speech in the Muslim world or to uphold the integrity of the institution as it exists in the West. The message conveyed to Muslims worldwide, regardless of their worldview, was one of Western disregard and utter disrespect for Islam and its most revered personality-the Prophet Muhammad.

The Prophet's Role in Islam and Muslim Society

¶7. (U) Understanding the source of Muslim discontent requires a better understanding and appreciation of the Prophet's sacred position in the lives of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims.

¶8. (U) The Prophet Muhammad, after God and the Qur'an, is the most unifying element and focal point for Muslims across the ideological spectrum. After the Qur'an, the Sunnah or sayings and teachings of the Prophet, capturing anecdotes of his personality and actions, serve as a sacred guide for believers. For Muslims, the Prophet embodies human perfection in all its dimensions. Muhammad's uniqueness lies in the Muslim belief, as revealed in the Qur'an,

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that the Prophet is the final messenger of God-the "Seal of the Prophets"-confirming the teachings of the prophets before him and reaffirming the final truth as revealed in the Muslim holy book. Moreover, Islam requires believers to have equal reverence for past prophets including Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and others.

Islam's Prohibition of Prophetic Imagery

¶9. (U) Although there exists today a written physical description (Hilya) of the Prophet, visual depictions or impersonations of Muhammad and other prophets are generally believed to be forbidden in Islam.

¶10. (U) There is general agreement among Muslims that Islam forbids iconography and the veneration of idols portraying religious figures, even those representing monotheistic prophets, on the basis that such human imagery fail to accurately depict the true images of holy personalities and run the greater risk of deification of prophets.

¶11. (U) However, there have been historical exceptions such as ancient Islamic art depicting the Prophet and other holy figures in religious scenes, albeit without discernible facial features. The Islamic injunctions against prophetic imagery notwithstanding, these attempts have nonetheless portrayed the Prophet and other religious figures positively.

The Prophet: No More than a Mortal Man

¶12. (U) Although Muslims venerate the Prophet, it is considered unacceptable, based on the teachings of the Qur'an, to deify him or any other prophet. For Muslims, the Prophet, as the embodiment of human perfection, was nothing more than a mortal man.

¶13. (U) Most Muslims reject any depiction of the Prophet, and certainly one presenting him as a terrorist. Within the past few years, American television shows such as Saturday Night Live and

South Park both included cartoon representations of Prophet Muhammad within the past few years without international repercussions, in part because those cartoons did not portray Muhammad as a terrorist.

¶14. (SBU) Though there is clearly reprehensible anti-Jewish and anti-Christian discourse in the Islamic world, and anti-Semitic cartoons, Muslims would argue that these do not disparage the revered Prophets of Christianity or of Judaism. Whereas a negative political cartoon in the Arab press of the Pope or Ariel Sharon might be viewed as permissible by some, cartoons of Jesus or Moses, even if permitted, would not be viewed as legitimate or acceptable forms of discourse.

¶15. (U) Most Muslims would not be offended by depictions of contemporary Muslim leaders, many of whom are considered political personalities. If the current Danish cartoons depicted Osama Bin Laden instead of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslim outcry would have been non-existent or isolated to a fundamentalist minority.

¶16. (U) Also, Muslims reject the logic that if European Christians find satirical portrayals of Jesus acceptable, that Muslims should likewise accept insulting images of Muhammad or even of Jesus. The violence of the past weeks might have been avoided had the Danish government condemned the cartoons at the outset, while also supporting freedom of speech.

Where are the Moderates?

¶17. (SBU) Ironically, the Danish cartoons have succeeded in uniting Muslims of all worldviews in condemnation of the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist. The unacceptable violent response in some countries to the cartoons has begged the question, where are the moderates? (This has also been asked in regard to the seeming lack of condemnation by Muslim moderates of the attacks on Shia in Iraq or support for the Global War on Terror.)

¶18. (SBU) The so-called Moderate Muslims are united with other Muslims in opposition to the cartoons. While the moderates do not support the burning of Embassies or sectarian violence, they do recognize as legitimate non-violent forms of protest, including boycotts of Danish products or peaceful demonstrations as seen in London, Istanbul and elsewhere. Insulting the central figure of Islam has widened the gap of mutual understanding and trust between Islam and the West, while also prompting a debate among Muslims, some of whom argue that the violence and deaths caused by Muslim demonstrators have done more to harm the image and standing of Islam and Muslims than the original provocative cartoons.

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